

Utah Lake

Alexander Williams
mentioned in this
Article

III

ARRIVAL OF THE MORMONS

FREMONT'S reports, and those of other travelers, meantime, made a deep impression upon the Mormons leading their church out of turbulent Illinois. It was necessary for them to find a place remote from all other settlements if they would worship as they chose. The Far West beckoned.

The Mormon pioneer company of 1847 carried west no settled idea of location; sites in Bear River Valley and Great Salt Lake Valley had been most frequently mentioned, but Brigham Young evidently kept an open mind and listened attentively to the mountain men he encountered along the way. On June 28 he encountered the far-ranging Jim Bridger, who pictured for him the features of the whole intermountain West. William Clayton reports his opinion of Utah Valley:

There is no timber on the Utah Lake only on the streams which empty into it. In the outlet of the Utah Lake which runs into the salt lake there is an abundance of blue grass and red and white clover . . . the Utah tribe of Indians inhabit the region around the Utah Lake and are a bad people. If they catch a man alone they are sure to rob and abuse him if they don't kill him, but parties of men are in no danger. They are mostly armed with guns. . . . All the valleys abound with persimmons and grapes which will make the best kind of wines. He never saw any grapes on the Utah Lake but there are plenty of cherries and berries of several kinds. He thinks the Utah Lake is the best country in the vicinity of the Salt Lake and the country is still better the farther south we go.

PROVO, Pioneer Mormon City

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. . . There is plenty of timber on all the streams and mountains and abundance of fish in the streams. There is timber all around the Utah Lake and plenty of good grass; not much of the wild sage only in patches. Wild flax grows in most of the valleys and they are the richest lands. . . . The Indians south of the Utah Lake and this side the desert raise corn, wheat and other kinds of grain and produce in abundance. The Utah's abound more on the west of the mountains near the salt lake than on the east side, ten to one, but we have no need to fear them for we can drive the whole of them in twenty-four hours but he would not kill them, he would make slaves of them.¹

As the Mormons cut their way through the Wasatch Mountains in the Donner path of 1846, Brigham Young must have weighed what he had heard of Utah Valley—a paradisaical region, but with Indian complications. By his instructions a letter was written at 5 a.m. on July 21, the day Orson Pratt found his way into Salt Lake Valley, directing Pratt, on emerging from the mountains, to bear a little to the north in search of a site of settlement, for the Utes, he thought, were likely to be “a little tenacious about their choice lands” in Utah Valley, and it would be well to keep in Salt Lake Valley, a no-man's-land separating Ute and Shoshone territory, until they could inform themselves as to the disposition of the Indians.² Initial Mormon settlement thus was on the site of Salt Lake City. Nevertheless, Young planned to explore all valleys, and, when opportunity permitted, establish settlements in those sufficiently well-watered.

On July 27, 1847, three days after his arrival in Salt Lake Valley, Young rode, with other church leaders, as far west as Great Salt Lake. The following day Orson Pratt from the Oquirrh Mountains looked southward down upon Utah Lake.³ A week later Jesse C. Little, Samuel Brannan, and W. W. Willis explored the valley and spoke well of it. Albert Carrington, with two others, set out for the lake hauling a boat on wheels, but at Outlet

Canyon (Jordan Narrows) was forced to return because of a lack of teams, and men. Launching their boat on the Jordan River, the men made their way back to Salt Lake City.⁴

In December, following the planting of his wheat and rye, Parley P. Pratt, with several of the brethren, set out for Utah Lake with a boat and fish-net. "We sailed up and down the lake shore on the western side for many miles, but had only poor success in fishing. We, however, caught a few samples of mountain trout and other fish. After exploring the lake and valley for a day or two, the company returned home, and a brother Summers and myself struck westward from the foot of the lake on horseback, on an exploring tour. On this tour we discovered and partly explored Cedar Valley, and there crossed over the west mountain range [Cedar Mountains] and discovered a valley beyond [Rush Valley]; passing through which we crossed a range of hills northward and entered Tooele Valley."⁵

Planting crops, erecting houses, and otherwise wresting a livelihood from the wilderness, the pioneers left colonization of other areas until their number was greater. Brigham Young had departed for Winter Quarters in present Nebraska to prepare the Mormons there for the long trek to Salt Lake Valley. Scattered parties found their way into Utah Valley in search of grazing land, but actual colonization waited more than a year.

On January 6, 1849, Amasa M. Lyman, Orrin P. Rockwell, George D. Grant, Jedediah M. Grant, David Fullmer, John S. Fullmer, Lewis Robison, Dimick B. Huntington, William Crosby, and George W. Boyd were selected by the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles in Great Salt Lake City to go to Utah Valley "to learn its capabilities for a stock range." When the cattle went, forty or fifty men were to go with them. Isaac Higbee and William

Wadsworth were at the same time constituted a committee "to seek out suitable fishing places in the Utah Lake, establish fisheries and supply the market."⁶ Amasa Lyman returned on January 12, and advised against moving stock into the district; he reported on January 20 that snow had been found to a depth of from 2½ to 4 inches, and that it had been concluded cattle would fare better in Great Salt Lake Valley.⁷

But by the end of February it had become necessary to repress depredations of the Utah Valley Indians. Hosea Stout relates that he, among others, was notified on February 28 to prepare himself to leave on the morrow for this expedition. A company of 31 was raised, the number being limited by difficulty in procuring horses. Although a force of fifty men had been anticipated, Colonel John Scott rode south with this diminished company, with orders "to take such measures as would put a final end to depredations in future." Leaving Great Salt Lake City at noon on March 1, the troop encamped for the night on Little Cottonwood Creek. From the settlements in this area four more men were enlisted. They reached Utah Valley on March 3, splitting up into two smaller troops commanded by Stout and Alexander Williams, "the better to divide and scour the country as we did not know where the Indians were located."⁸

On entering Utah Valley, Williams' force continued up the Jordan toward Utah Lake, while Stout's company proceeded directly south to Dry Creek. Colonel Scott, with some six men, traveled between the two divisions as a liaison command. Despite energetic beating of the bushes, no Indians were found, and the two companies reunited for the night on "American Creek," receiving before morning "in addition to our usual amount of bed clothes a blanket of snow some two inches deep." Sending Dimick B. Huntington and "Barney" Ward on before them, the

troop rode on to the Provo, where they found the Utes friendly but "much excited being evidently afraid of us," as Stout observed.⁹ Little Chief, however, was perfectly willing to assist the Mormons, saying that a band of outlaws had done the mischief and it was good to kill them, for they deserved to die according to their own laws.¹⁰ Encampment was made three miles up the Provo, but Little Chief's two sons, sent to guide the militia, favored a night attack before the offenders could be warned, and accordingly the punitive expedition proceeded on up the Provo to the high bench lands, traveled north a few miles, and at last dismounted, leaving the horses with a guard of ten while the remaining twenty-five men advanced on foot for the assault. After a six-mile march, the Mormon scouts located the Indian fires on the first creek south of the Provo. The whites bivouacked for the night, calling up their horses and kindling small fires to keep from freezing.¹¹

At daybreak Scott divided his party into four. Hosea Stout was sent, he says, to "the farthest side to prevent them from escaping to the mountains"; Alexander Williams was ordered to the mouth of the canyon, to prevent escape in that direction; Judson Stoddard, with a few horsemen, was held in reserve on the creek in the event escape was attempted into Utah Valley; and a fourth party, led by Dimick B. Huntington, marched directly on the camp.

"They discovered us," writes Hosea Stout, "about the time we had fairly surrounded them while it was yet twilight & attempted to escape in several different directions but found themselves surrounded whereupon they commenced a long & loud speech which I afterwards learned only consisted in telling us to go away or they would fire upon us while our interpreters also told them that we desired to see them and wished them to come out. The

Utah who was along with us also tried to persuade them to come out but all to no purpose."¹²

After a long interval the arrows began to fly. "From where we stood," Oliver Huntington writes, "we could not see; yet we could hear the twang of the bow string. Our orders were, every man take care of himself and as many of the enemy as we could, i.e., to fight the enemy in their own way. . . . We always shot in such haste, that nearly all our shots missed, and . . . we were a long time firing . . . skulking in the brush, looking, peaking, and trying to get a shot. We knew nothing of how many there was, but from their crying, howling, mourning, and loud talk supposed there was fifteen or twenty. The women and children were called to come out, that we wanted not to hurt them. They would not come. The first one shot was their leader. Then such crying I think white men never heard before."¹³

Hosea Stout continues the story:

In a few moments [after commencement of battle] one of the Indians was killed and several wounded. They soon took shelter in the creek which had perpendicular banks about 4 feet high thickly set with willow which so completely shielded them that we could not see them only when they raised up to shoot at us. We were about two hours engaged with them. They fought with the most determined resolution to die rather than yield as they could often be heard to encourage each other. Sometimes they would commence to sing as if they were gambling as a token of defiance to us. Some 5 or 6 times during the engagement we ceased firing and both our interpreters & the Utah tried to persuade them to come out also to send out their women & children that they might be spared if they would not yield but all to no effect.

Some of the Squaws were at length found couch in the water under the thick brush & were induced to come out. They were in a most deplorable situation. Having been in the water about an hour & a half, they were nearly froze. We kindled up a fire for them which rendered them more comfortable.

By sending these back we soon prevailed on the rest to come

out also and soon 13 women & children came out, among the rest a lad about sixteen gave up. He had fought manfully during the engagement.

Two of the women were wounded on the head with stones which we had thrown in to the brush to ascertain where they were hid. Soon after they gave up we succeeded in killing two more men leaving only one more who immediately broke through the brush and tried to escape to the Utah who was on the hill looking on. He was killed however before he ran far. Thus ended the battle with out one of our men even being hurt although they shot hundreds of arrows at us, some times at only a few yards distance.

Our men were perfectly calm and deliberate all the time and did not fire at random as is so common on such occasions. There was no time during the whole engagement when the men could not be easily controlled so much so that the wants of the prisoners were attended as well as circumstances would admit. As soon as they gave up they asked leave to start immediately to the City, and insisted on it not being willing to go the [to] their tribe.

This little band had separated themselves from the rest because they were determined to live by stealing from the whites while the rest were friendly and would not suffer it. They had for some time been very insolent and some of them had even shot at some of the whites. I suppose that the women were afraid of the Urahs. . . . We now returned to our camp where we found Little Chief and several Indians. He said we had done right although he felt like he could cry when he saw what a bad end these men had come to by their dishonesty. He also said we did wrong in not killing the lad for he would kill a white man yet for revenge.¹⁴

Oliver Huntington gives a more vivid picture of Little Chief's feelings. "When the firing ceased it was perhaps eight o'clock, the sun was high up and . . . the volleys of our guns rolled down the mountainside and lighted on Little Chief's ears, and seemed to him, with all the horrors of his own death knell. He thought, 'oh my countrymen'; those once of his own band are now being hewed down by the magic white men. His heart was filled with pity, although but a few hours previously he had signed their death warrant by sending his men to guide us . . . he

mounted his best horse and dashed up the mountainside for ten miles . . . his horse . . . was as wet as the poor squaw's who had laid in the creek. . . . The old man howled, cried, moaned, hollowed, screamed, and smote his breast. . . . He blamed himself and cursed the whites, and said it would not be good medicine for two or three [whites] to come up there alone as they had done before."¹⁵

From the scene of the conflict, which history has commemorated in the name Battle Creek (site of Pleasant Grove), the squaws took the bodies of the slain into the canyon above. The Mormon company arrived back in Great Salt Lake City at 2 p.m. on March 6.¹⁶ The campaign had been successful, but the church authorities did not approve. They "deplored the fatalities attending it, not only from humanitarian considerations, but fearing probably that it would precipitate a general war, and unify all the savage bands of the vicinity. . . ." Scott evidently was reprimanded for his handling of the affair, for in February, a year later, when he was ordered to raise a company to support George D. Grant in the Fort Utah expedition, he refused. For this act he was cashiered from the Nauvoo Legion, but eventually he and the authorities reconciled their differences.